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Chapter 9

The Logic of the Spiritual Path

If the basic premise of *Advaita Vedānta* consists of the claim that the experience of our ordinary daily life does not exhaust reality, and of the further claim that this missing dimension is capable of becoming accessible through spiritual practice, then what it needs to offer to us is a convenient shorthand statement of this claim rather than a long paragraph such as this one.

It offers such a shorthand description in the interpretation it offers of the sacred Hindu symbol:

AUM

This sacred sound goes back to at least the tenth century B.C. How it acquired a sacred character is not known with scholarly certainty but acquire it it did. It is an indication of the measure of its sanctity that it is considered a sacred sound in all the other religions of Indian origin: Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism (although the evidence of its acceptance in the *Theravāda* form of Buddhism may be a point of debate). It has remained a sacred sound to this date and is often chanted to mark the start and the conclusion of a religious occasion.

This aural symbol is thus virtually the property of the Indic religious tradition, with different religions imparting to it their own interpretation. The same is true of Hinduism, which given its pluralistic character is also subject to a wide variety of interpretations.

One aspect of this sound symbol has been particularly helpful in facilitating its various interpretations, apart from its sacred character in general. This consists of the fact that according to Sanskrit grammar the sound AUM consists of three distinct syllables—A, U, and M. This triadic character of the sound enables it to accommodate a variety of trinities. In Hindu theism, for instance, the sound is used to represent

the three gods of the so-called Hindu trinity: *Brahmā*, the god of creation, *Viṣṇu,* the god of preservation, and *Śīva*, the god of termination. Indian Christians have been known to use the sound to represent the Christian trinity.

This tripartite aspect of the sound AUM is also used in *Advaita Vedānta* to represent the three states of consciousness dealt with in extenso in a previous chapter—those of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—in the following manner:

Waking	A
Dreaming	U
Deep sleep	M

The reader will realize that this pattern of association has the merit of reducing the entire range of our experience of life into a single symbol. This could be considered the spiritual equivalent of the Einsteinian equation $e=mc^2$, equally sensational in its brevity.

All the experiences we have during the course of a day, and even the course of a life, are experienced by us in one of the three states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, or deep sleep. Interpreted in this way the symbol offers a summary statement of the whole of our normal everyday life. In order to serve a spiritual purpose, however, the symbol must do something more than tersely summarize all that we experience in life; it must also point to that which remains to be experienced in order to complete our experience of life. In other words, the symbol must also find room for symbolizing the fourth state of consciousness as well.

Advaita Vedānta achieves this result by pointing out that although the AUM sound seems to contain only three parts in terms of the three syllables, the silence which follows its utterance could also be interpreted as part of it for our purposes. Viewed in this way the AUM sound could be said to consist of two parts—the audible part represented by the three syllables, and the inaudible part represented

by the silence which follows it. This inaudible part then may be taken to stand for the fourth state of consciousness as follows:

A	Waking State
U	Dreaming State
M	Deep Sleep State
Silence	Fourth State

These correspondences border on the felicitous because just like the silence that may be considered part of the AUM sound and is yet qualitatively apart from it, the fourth state may be counted as one of the states of consciousness but it is also unique in its own way.

In terms of this analysis the AUM sound then comes to represent both life as it is and life as we want it to be—to include the experience of the fourth and thus combine both diagnosis and prescription in one.

But it does more. It also doubles as the medicine itself in the following manner, if we continue to employ medical imagery. As will be explained in more detail in a later chapter, once we start on the path of spiritual practice the AUM sound, whether chanted audibly or inaudibly, serves as a useful instrument to concentrate the mind. That is to say, it can be used as a mantra to concentrate the mind so as to facilitate the attainment of *samādhi*. Thus, while as a symbol it serves to define the end of spiritual practice, as a mantra it also provides a means for such practice. Its ability to represent both the end as well as the means of spiritual life makes it spiritually even more potent.

This entire book up to this point can then be summarized in one sound symbol—AUM.

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